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***On the Waterfront*: The True Facts**

On the Waterfront is well grounded in fact. This should come as no surprise to anyone who has seen this 1954 Oscar winner. With its gritty photography, naturalistic performances, and authentic dockside locations, the fflm exudes a heightened sense of realism that makes it natural to believe that the story is an accurate depiction of waterfront life. And for good reason. The convincing illusion on screen was the result of several years of intensive research.

During this time, screenwriter Budd Schulberg befriended longshoremen along the New York and New Jersey piers, and day after day listened to their stories about brutal labor racketeers and their corrupt practices. As is shown in the film, the waterfront union forced workers to submit to tyrannical "shape-ups." Twice a day, longshoremen had to assemble on the docks before a union hiring boss who would choose a mere half or third of them to work. Those who did land a job had to deliver kickbacks to union officials. Those who didn't often had to accept money from union-sponsored loan sharks in order to support their families; they would then have to pay the money back at usurious rates. Goons pummeled anyone who questioned union authority and murdered anyone who threatened to testify against the racket. All this can be seen in the operations of Lee J. Cobb's Johnny Friendly in the Elia Kazan-directed film. But it was not only the general conditions on the waterfront that found their way into Schulberg's script. One man in particular also served as a model for a key character.

On screen, the courageous, tough-minded Father Barry, played by Karl Malden, provides the moral leadership for Terry Molloy (Marlon Brando) and other longshoremen anxious to make a stand against their union overseers. Schulberg based the character on a real waterfront priest who played a pivotal role in triggering harbor-union reforms. Named Father John Corridan, this man of the cloth was described by Schulberg as a "chain-smoking, ruddy‑complexioned man in his early forties who looked fit enough to swing a hook with the best of them." While Malden's Father Barry amounted to art imitating life, Father Corridan, in turn, seemed to be a case of life imitating art. He was so prin­cipled, forthright, and streetwise that he seemed to have emerged from an old Warner Bros. movie, specifically one of those in which Pat O'Brien would play a priest who could alternately do God's work and swap snappy repartee with hardened street toughs.

Father Corridan came by his man-of-the-people image honestly. He grew up in the tenements of New York and knew firsthand what strug­gling city families had to contend with. His father, an Irish immigrant and a New York City cop, died when Corridan was nine. This left his mother with the job of supporting the family as a cleaning woman. The Jesuit order of the priesthood was Corridan's route out of the slums.

Father Corridan began his waterfront work in 1946, at the age of thirty‑five, when he joined the St. Francis Xavier Labor School, near the west-side piers of Manhattan. Here, he instructed workers on the rele­vance of Christian principles in labor/management relations. As he learned about gangsterism and working conditions on the docks, his work became a crusade for honest trade unionism.

His first task was to gather information on the corrupt system gov­erning waterfront life. In time, he assembled enough documents to fill sixteen file cabinets, while the facts and figures compiled in his head were enough to qualify him as a leading expert on the subject. During this period, the International Longshoremen's Association was dominated by such disreputable figures as Big Bill McConuick, Tough Tony Anastasio, and, further in the background, Tough Tony's brother, Albert Anastasia of Murder, Inc. Cooperating with the crooked union were the shipping companies, as well as many local government officials.

It wasn't always safe for dockworkers to show up at the Xavier School for Corridan's classes. Sometimes they had to sneak in through a back door to avoid being seen by union enforcers. Once, Father Corridan confronted a union henchman who had been assigned to disrupt his class. The priest gave the goon a talking-to that would have done either Pat O'Brien or Karl Malden proud, giving the hireling a message to take back to his bosses. The priest warned that "if anything happens to the men I'm trying to help here, I'll know who's responsible, and I'll personally see to it that they are broken throughout this port. They'll pay and I'll see that they pay."

Other memorable moments in Corridan's fight against gangsterism occurred during public pronouncements. One of them prefigured the emotionally powerful scene in On the Waterfront in which Father Barry delivers a sermon to workers in the hold of a ship. In his own sermon on the docks, Father Corridan expounded upon the presence of Christ on the waterfront: "I suppose some people would smirk at the thought of Christ in the shape-up. It is about as absurd as the fact that He carried carpenter's tools in His hands and earned His bread by the sweat of His brow. As absurd as the fact that Christ redeemed all men irrespective of their race, color, or station in life. It can be absurd only to those of whom Christ has said, 'Having eyes, they see not; and having ears, they hear not.' Because they don't want to see or hear. Christ also said, 'If you do it to the least of mine, you do it to me.' So Christ is in the shape-up."

Father Corridan's crusade began to produce results during the har­bor wildcat strike of 1951. A rebel faction of dockworkers rejected a compromise contract agreement arranged by union leaders--an agreement imposed on the rank and file. To dramatize their grievances, the rebels closed down the New York/New Jersey ports for twenty-five days. Father Corridan conducted a public prayer at strike headquarters to strengthen the rebels' morale and to refute the cynical union charge that the strikers were Communists. Working with other reformers behind the scenes, he also pressured New York Governor Thomas Dewey to look into the issues raised by the strike. The priest knew that only state or federal officials could help; the local government was too compromised by organized-crime influence. Eventually Father Corridan's efforts led to a New York State investigation and the establishment of a joint New York/New Jersey commission to regulate the harbor business. Among its other refonus, the commission banned the hated shape-up.

Father Corridan stayed on the waterfront until 1957, three years after Karl Malden portrayed his fictional counterpart on screen. By that time he had been struggling for the dockworkers' cause for eleven years. His reward for his good works was a more reflective, leisurely job teaching economics at the Jesuits' LeMoyne College in Syracuse.

excerpt from *For Reel,* byHarold Schechter and David Everitt ( New York: Berkely Boulevard, 2000)